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AUTHOR Bates, Adrian
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ABSTRACT

Skills.net is a 3-year program providing free or affordable Internet access and training to local Victorian (Australia) communities. It is especially aimed at those who would normally miss out on such access, such as the unemployed, women, people with disabilities, people from non-English speaking backgrounds, Aboriginals, and communities in remote and rural Victoria. Skills.net has been very successful, with 105 projects committed to ensuring the program philosophy survives in the future. A Skills.net association is proposed to enable the program to continue after current government funding runs out. The association will be a hybrid between a community/industry association and an organization selling technical services. Its objectives and activities would include networking between projects and other associations, marketing and promoting the Skills.net brand, developing the Skills.net movement, providing collective representation, developing and delivering training services, advising on grant applications, brokering sponsorship, promoting local programs, representing to the government, and promoting national and international linkages. Financing will include subscriptions and sponsorships, fee-for-service activities, government seed funding for 3 years, E-commerce, training delivery, and grants. (TD)

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Skills.net - Community Internet Access and Training in Victoria, Australia

Paper Presented at the Community Development Society Conference
Spokane, Washington USA
25th - 28th July 1999

by: **Adrian Bates (adrianb@vicnet.net.au)**
Melbourne, Victoria, Australia
Website: http://www.skills.net.au

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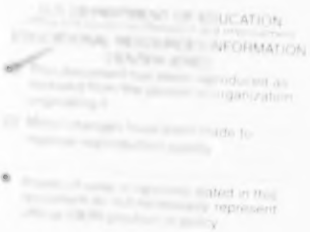

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Skills.net - Community Internet Access and Training in Victoria, Australia

Paper Presented at the Community Development Society Conference in Spokane, Washington USA 25th - 28th July 1999

Question: How to survive once the Government funds run out?
Answer: Skills.net Association -- a model for the world in how community Internet access and training centres can survive by working together (Work very much in Progress)

Author Listing:
Adrian Bates (adrianb@vicnet.net.au)
Melbourne, Victoria, Australia
Website: http://www.skills.net.au

Skills.net is a three year $5 million dollar program to fund one hundred and nineteen Skills.net projects across Victoria providing free or affordable Internet access and training to local communities. It is especially aimed at those who would normally miss out on such access, e.g. unemployed, women, people with disabilities, people from non-English speaking backgrounds, Aboriginals and communities in remote and rural Victoria. Skills.net has the aim of providing this training and access to 40,000 Victorians by the end of the funded program.

Currently there are 105 funded projects in Victoria from Mildura to Mallacoota with more than 350 Skills.net sites providing more than 1,500 computers for Skills.net members and the people of Victoria to use, with approximately 13,000 Skills.net members to date.

Skills.net is funded through Multimedia Victoria and the day to day management of the program is handled by two staff at Victoria's Network: VICNET.

Skills.net has been tremendously successful with a thriving network of projects now up and running, all committed to ensuring the Skills.net philosophy survives on into the future. In order to achieve this and to maintain and enhance the collective benefits that the Skills.net program offers projects, the Skills.net community considers that a Skills.net Association should be formed.

This proposal outlines what the Skills.net Association will do, how it will survive and become self-sustainable after the initial two years seed funding from Multimedia Victoria.

Multimedia Victoria has invested $5 million dollars into the Skills.net program and Minister Stockdale has made a lot of his time available for project launches, grant announcements and so on. This has demonstrated the importance of Skills.net to Multimedia Victoria and the government, especially with the brand of Skills.net now becoming so well known and established throughout Victoria. Other states are also starting to recognize the significance of Skills.net and it can be considered a major Victorian success story.

We now find ourselves at the crossroads with Skills.net. The $5 million dollar funding finishes in July 1999 and once this ends a lot of the co-ordination and support provided centrally by VICNET would also cease. Even though VICNET are committed to community networking including Skills.net projects, without any finance to employ Skills.net co-ordination staff they would be unable to continue the high level of support they now provide to projects across the state.

So we have a program that the government has heavily invested time and money into, one that has done all and more of what it was established to do, an organisation in VICNET which sees Skills.net as a natural partner to its stated community aims as listed in its mission statement and wants to work in with Skills.net to see it grow in the future, and most importantly, a network of committed projects across Victoria who are determined to support each other and ensure Skills.net and what it stands for continues into the future. And possibly expands across the rest of Australia.

What is needed to ensure this happens is support of Multimedia Victoria with seed funding of $314,000 over the first two years of the Skills.net Associations operation. VICNET will provide office space and access to their skilled staff to provide backup to the Association during this time, and the projects are committed to working together to ensure Skills.net grows in the future.

I hope that MMV can find the necessary $314,000 of support which is a small amount of extra funding to ensure the benefits of the initial $5 million dollars continue to be delivered long into the future.

1. What a Skills.net Association is all About

a. the Skills.net Association Vision Is:

- That all Victorians/Australians seeking to learn about the Internet will use Skills.net as a learning pathway;
- That all organisations working in Adult, Community and Further Education, Training, Telecommunications, Agricultural and Rural, Service, Business and Government, will recognize and accept the benefits of the awareness-raising, training and goodwill that Skills.net promotes in the use of the Internet as a communications medium and the potential benefits it offers in terms of job opportunities, new individual and business partnerships, cost savings to business, marketing potential and so on., and give the Association their full support;
- That Skills.net project groups already funded and supported by the Multimedia Victoria initiative will continue to benefit from the support and networking directed at meeting their needs and aspirations; and,
- That any community groups wishing to form a Skills.net project, or similar representative body, for a designated community group or area, will be able to join the association and enjoy the benefits and opportunities currently offered to existing members.

- That the Skills.net Association is a dynamic organisation keeping tabs on new advances in Internet and on-line services and becomes a dynamic system of informing and training the community in future technical and communication changes, thereby ensuring the community is kept up to date with all future advances and can influence them to make sure they fulfil community needs rather than simply being playthings of the technocrats.

b. THE SKILLS.NET ASSOCIATION MISSION IS:

- To advise and train individuals and communities in the use of, and access to, the Internet and its current best practice;
- To encourage people to use the Internet to its best advantage, to take a leadership role in facilitating Australia, Australians and Australian businesses to become world leaders in the application of this technology to education, learning, community and economic development;
- To establish Skills.net projects for the support of community focused Internet training and access; this also encompasses business especially small business.
- To assist communities to meet the objectives for which they sought equitable access to, and skills in using, new technologies;
- To ensure Skills.net projects are accountable to their communities, with a service charter and client focus;
- To safeguard Skills.net projects from professional misconduct and misrepresentation; and
- To enforce the membership of the Skills.net Association with a fair and legal charter (or membership plan).

c. THE SKILLS.NET ASSOCIATION OBJECTIVES ARE:

- To actively seek representation of the Skills.net Association member groups in business, government, and community affairs which meet the mission statement of the Skills.net Association;
- To seek new business, provide professional advice and services, and tender on behalf of Skills.net Association member organisations;
- To administer the Skills.net Association in an efficient and effective manner;
- To promote an understanding of, and compliance with, the Skills.net Association charter, the rules and regulations governing the affairs of member organisations who wish to be a member of the Skills.net Association; and
- To assist Skills.net Association member organisations meet community expectations and manage their own affairs as Skills.net project members, under the Rules and Regulations of the Articles of Incorporation.

d. THE SKILLS.NET ASSOCIATION STRATEGIES ARE:

- To constantly keep the vision, mission and objectives of the Skills.net Association under peer review;

- To continually assess the needs and aspirations of those members to whom the Skills.net Association provides membership services to;
- To ensure that all staff and member organisations are aware that the cultural and heritage values of clients may differ from our values, and that these values should be tolerated in our pluralist society, and how these values may affect the administration and delivery of services in Skills.net member projects;
- To encourage all Skills.net Association member organisations to adopt current best practice and promote ongoing learning opportunities for staff and clients in the use of new technology;
- To meet the needs of those Skills.net Association member organisations to whom the Skills.net Association provides services by providing education and training workshops on the operations of the Skills.net Association and expected outcomes for Skills.net Projects;
- To inform and train the community in future technical and communication changes, thereby ensuring the community is kept up to date with all future advances and can influence them to make sure they fulfil community needs rather than simply being playthings of the technocrats.
- To meet the needs and aspirations of those member organisations to whom the Skills.net Association provides services by developing and distributing information explaining the role and functions of the Skills.net Association and its member organisations; and
- To ensure compliance by member organisations with the Rules and Regulation incorporated into the Skills.net Association Articles of Association.

2. Activities

There are a number of activities that could be part of the core functions of the Association. These are services for which members (and non-members at a higher rate) would be willing to pay for. These payments help to ensure the long-term viability of the Association.

- In the first two years of the Skills.net Association it will take over from VICNET the management function of the MMV funded Skills.net Program. This includes auditing projects, updating membership information, and so on. This function will end once the MMV Skills.net funding and program ends.
- Networking among Skills.net projects
- Training - Provision of training services for members. This includes "train the trainer courses" for members, thereby equipping them to provide the necessary training to their clients.
- Development of materials - Development of training materials that can be licensed/sold to projects. This includes hard copy material, on-line material and possibly Multimedia CD-ROM production.
- Providing advice to improve the standard of content of courses.
- Acting as the central management and administration point for the promotion and operation of the Skills.net Cybermarket - www.skills.net.au/cybermarket. This includes developing and delivering training to members on how to sign up to the cybermarket SME's in their

area.

- Providing a central organisation which can go for larger government grants, sponsorship and tenders than individual centres could submit for.
- Provide advice and help to individual projects going for more localized grants, sponsorship and tenders.
- Technical advice, support and help. This would include providing access to technically qualified staff would could visit member sites and do what is necessary to set them up for Internet access and training.
- Sponsorship broker - Act as agent for projects individually and for Skills.net as a whole.
- Negotiation of special rates for services, software and hardware across Australia.
- Marketing and promotion of Skills.net - Market and promote the Skills.net brand and promote member organisations and their achievements. This includes development of marketing material, brochures, posters and so on.
- Promote local community programs and the benefits of on-line access.
- Quality management and best practice - Operate a quality assurance and certification program for projects. Ensure maintenance of standards and improvement. Set best practice standards.
- Annual conference and regional forums - Conduct an annual conference for members and a rolling schedule of regional forums, where projects can meet and discuss community networking, sponsorship, funding, training and all the other issues of concern.
- Representation to Government - Represent member projects to government - National, State and local
- National linkages - Develop linkages with national organisations and Associations.
- International linkages - Maintain and develop links with like international organisations.
- Networking with other Associations - Network with related industry Associations in multimedia and communications and community organisations.

3. Services

Activities would be grouped into two service portfolios - member services and commercial services:

Member Services Portfolio

- Networking

Member Communication - on-line chat/conference
Promotion of Skills.net
Lobbying
Public relations
Funding advice
Member database
Tender development
Grant application preparation and co-ordination

Commercial Services Portfolio

Technical Support Services
Connection Services

Demand aggregation
Quality assurance
Certification and licensing
Funding submissions
Tender Services
Marketing consulting for groups
Sourcing new business opportunities for members

- Sponsorship development
- Conferences

Member services would be financed through subscriptions and sponsorships and commercial services would be financed through fee-for-service activities.

Delivering Member Services and Benefits

Services would be delivered to Association members through:

- The Skills.net Association mailing list
- On-line publishing and information
  - Manuals and brochures
  - Workshops and training programs
- Consulting advice and counselling
- Regional forums
- Annual conference

4. Skills.net Brand

The Skills.net brand and logo will be licensed to the Association in order to deliver benefit to members and source of income to the Association. This will require the State Library to deregister the name and logo at the end of the "official" Skills.net funding and for a fully constituted Skills.net Association to then register it for the Association.

Skills.net is a brand that is owned by the State Library of Victoria. MMV and the SLV currently require that Skills.net funded organisations use the brand in promoting their projects and training courses.

The brand has potential value for the commercial activities of an Association.

- The value is in terms of the awareness of the brand as defining program excellence. The brand needs to be promoted by the Association to create this value.
- Brand value comes from recognition and what it stands for. Building the brand requires strong promotion.
- Value is in terms of the guarantee of quality that it provides for training consumers.
- The value to members of the Association is enhanced if the quality guarantee enables them to secure grant funding or contracts for training projects.
- If the Association does a good job of brand marketing it can allow members to focus on selling their individual programs.
- The brand could be transferred to the Association. The Association would then be responsible for licensing and controlling the use of the brand. Usage would be by member organisations whose training activities comply with training and operating standards established by the Association.

Licensing of the brand delivers a benefit to members and a source of income to the Association.

The brand creates a franchise situation with the Association being able to deliver a complete package to members comprising:

- Model structure
- Organisational systems
- Training packages
- Hardware systems
- Partnership models

This could be a major direction for the Association.

This also provides a vehicle for taking the Skills.net model into a national arena.

5. Organisation Structure

The Skills.net Association would be an incorporated Association formed pursuant to the provisions of the Associations Incorporation Act 1981. As mentioned above the State Library of Victoria would have to deregister the name, Skills.net, so the Association could register it.

6. Membership

Membership would be open to any community groups that supported the objectives of the Association and could demonstrate their pursuit of similar objectives, at a community based level. Associate membership could be available for other types of community organisations, government agencies and sponsor organisations.

Some variations to the standard rules would be required to ensure that the Association was created for the benefits of the community groups involved and not individuals. The appropriate way to do this would be to provide that its membership was restricted to the community groups which it served. Membership would not be open to individual persons.

Membership would not be restricted to community groups receiving grants. It would be open to any community groups that supported the objectives of the Association and could demonstrate their pursuit of similar objectives, at a community based level.

7. Skills.net Association Model

The model would have the Skills.net association operating as a full time professional association. It would take over many of the functions currently provided by VICNET and would offer a range of commercial services.

The model can be summarised in the following table:

Features	Model
Objectives	• Networking between projects • Promote Skills.net • Develop the Skills.net movement • Collective representation • Develop new services • Deliver services
Activities	• Networking • Share information • Promote Skills.net • Conferences • Develop sponsorships • Develop and deliver services • National and international links
Membership	• Skills.net projects • Other similar organisations • Training organisations • Sponsors • Suppliers
Funding	• Annual subscription • Sponsorship • Fees for service • Successful Tenders, i.e. Australian Electronic Business Network training deliver tender • E-commerce - Skills.net Cybermarket • Government grants
Management Structure	• Committee of management • Full-time executive officer • Full-time executive assistant
Location	• Skills.net Assoc. office at VICNET

8. Sources of Funding

There are a wide variety of sources of funding. Some examples are given below:

- **Membership Fees** - Membership fees are likely to generate about 10% of the projected revenue. Skills.net projects are community-based organisations with a limited ability to pay substantial fees. Skills.net projects consider that the fee structure proposed in this submission would be acceptable.
- **Fee-for-service** - Fee-for-service delivery is an option although the Skills.net Association products need to be established first in order to on-sell it. At this stage it is

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not included in the projections, but will be pursued as a revenue possibility after the formation of the Association. The development and provision of training modules and software, and software and hardware support are likely fee-for-service candidates.

- **Services** - Skills.net Association could develop and sell training and software (possibly through VICNET) - a nominal amount of every sale could be transferred to the Skills.net Association - again not included in revenue projections
- **Consultation fees** for contracts and tender acquisition are a potential source of revenue for the Association.
- **Franchise fees** for use of the Skills.net brand and services are potential sources of revenue. For example a licence fee could be associated with the use of the Skills.net brand and services.
- **Sponsorship from business** is a possible source of funding. This could be cash or in kind. Skills.net Association could tap into in-kind funding VICNET already receives (e.g., Digital, AccessOne, etc.). A modest projection for industry sponsorship is included in the projection.
- **Brokerage fees** - organisations tendering for grants could include in their package of services, Skills.net accreditation. The Association would provide training, technical advice and support in return for a fee.
- **Grants** - An initial grant by the government/MMV would be required to establish the Association. Government may contract with the Association to deliver specific services or programs in the future.
- **Further Grants** - With over 100 Skills.net projects currently in operation, this gives a great scope to apply for large government grants to deliver training and public access services to a large number of areas across Victoria and soon Australia. The Skills.net Association will go for these grants with some of the funding being used to cover central administration and staff costs. An example of this is the current Skills.net submission to the Federal Networking the Nation program to fund another 100 Skills.net projects in schools, which uses the experience of Skills.net and the infrastructure of VicOne. This funding includes a component for central administration and staff costs. The success of this submission will be known in December 1998. It is an example of the kinds of grants the Skills.net Association can tender for.
- **Training Delivery Tenders** - There is a growing demand for Internet training courses to be delivered across Victoria. Skills.net can deliver the required standardized Internet training at over 100 venues across the state. This has already attracted the attention of the Australian Electronic Business Network who are developing E-commerce training packages for small business, but who need a way to deliver these courses. Skills.net is in discussion with the Aebn for the Skills.net projects to deliver these courses. Similarly we are in discussion with other groups who also need state-wide delivery of Internet courses for their members, employers and groups. Skills.net is ideally placed to win these training delivery tenders. We have the material and the sites. Eventually Skills.net will be able to deliver this training nationally.
- **E-commerce** - Skills.net is already working on an E-commerce solution for SME'S to be delivered through Skills.net sites. Check out the Skills.net Cybermarket at

http://cybermarket.skills.net.au/. E-commerce should bring in significant income for the association and projects. The Cybermarket shows the Skills.net Association working with commercial entities like Telstra, Microsoft and Praxa to bring about this solution for small business. Skills.net provides all such businesses with a link to the SME market they do not have. This provides a great opportunity for the Skills.net Association to form mutually beneficial commercial relationships with industry.

- **Web Page Design** - With the pool of talent available in Skills.net projects, the Skills.net Association can successfully tender for significant web publishing and databasing contracts. These would be subcontracted to the projects with the skills in the relevant area.

10. Sponsors

Existing projects have been successful in attracting support form a range of sponsors.

Commercial and corporate sponsorship of individual Skills.net projects is largely confined to the Leader projects (that is, projects receiving $100,000 in Skills.net funding).

- In addition general Skills.net projects are likely to receive funding from a variety of government sources in order to support their programs.

Project partners may also include:

- Local Universities
- TAFE sector support
- Colleges of Advanced Education
- Public libraries
- Local community groups
- Local businesses

The Association will play two roles in relation to sponsors.

1. Sourcing sponsors for the Association. We believe there is potential to source a combination of cash and in-kind contributions for the Association.
2. Act as a broker for sponsorship to specific projects. The Association would take a sponsorship management fee for this from the projects/members.
3. Act as a clearing house and single point of contact for businesses with an interest in sponsoring information society programs
4. Preparation of specific sponsorship proposals

SUMMARY

The Association will provide a vehicle for the Skills.net program and project concepts to survive and prosper in Victoria and to expand Nationally and even Internationally. The Skills.net Association model offers a way in which community Internet access and training venues can look to survive into the future after seed funding from Government, without having to keep going back cap in hand to governments for more funding. The model is universal and can be applied in other countries. For further Information please email Adrian Bates at adrianb@vicnet.net.au

- A Skills.net Association will be a hybrid between a community/industry association and an organisation selling technical services.
- The objectives of the Skills.net Association will include:
    - o Networking between projects
    - o Promotion of the Skills.net brand
    - o Development of the Skills.net movement
    - o Provision of collective representation
    - o Development of member services
    - o Delivery of services to member organisations
- A Skills.net Association will engage in the following activities:
    - o Networking among Skills.net projects
    - o Training
    - o Development of training materials
    - o Advice on grant applications
    - o Technical advice
    - o Sponsorship broker
    - o Negotiation of special rates for services and hardware
    - o Marketing and promotion of Skills.net
    - o Promote local community programs
    - o Quality management and best practice
    - o Annual conference
    - o Representation to Government
    - o Promote national linkages
    - o Promote international linkages
    - o Networking with other associations
- Two portfolios of services will be provided - member services and commercial services.
- Member services will be financed through subscriptions and sponsorships.
- Commercial services will be financed through fee-for-service activities.
- The Skills.net brand will be licensed in order to deliver benefit to members and a source of income to the Association.
- A Skills.net Association will be formed pursuant to the provisions of the Associations Incorporation Act.
- Membership of an Association will be restricted to organisations. No individual membership would be allowed.

- Association membership will not be restricted to currently funded Skills.net projects.
- Membership will be open to any community group that supports the objectives of the Association.
- Membership will be available at two levels - Full and Associate.
- Management structure of the Association will develop with the evolution of the Association itself.
- A Committee of Management will be formed in the early stages of the Association.
- Appointed staff will need an entrepreneurial approach.
- The Government will need to provide seeding funding for the Association over a three year period. If the Association is not self-funding by the end of Year 2 support should be withdrawn.
- Revenue from subscriptions will not be sufficient to fund the operations of an Association.
- Revenue from subscriptions would not be sufficient to fund the operations of the Association and revenue will increasingly be derived from commercial activities, Ecommerce, successful tendering for training delivery contracts, successful grant applications to both federal and state government Internet programs.
- The Association may provide a vehicle for the Skills.net program and project concepts to be replicated at a national level. If this were the case, the activities and revenue based of the Association would be substantially expanded.